

McKenna to leave politics to focus on climate change; Minister's surprise exit leaves opening for former Bank of Canada governor

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Byline: Joan Bryden The Canadian Press

Body

Infrastructure Minister Catherine McKenna has decided not to seek re-election.

Her surprise decision opens up some prime political real estate that could become a launching pad for former Bank of Canada governor Mark Carney should he decide to run for the Liberals in the next election.

McKenna has held Ottawa Centre, a riding that encompasses Parliament Hill, since 2015, when she wrestled it away from the New Democrats.

Carney has not committed to running but promised in April, during his political debut at the Liberal party's virtual convention, to do whatever he can to support the party.

McKenna is to hold a news conference Monday to announce her decision to stand down in the next election, but an advance copy of her remarks was obtained Sunday by The Canadian Press.

"When I got into politics now eight years ago, I made two simple promises to myself: always fight for what I believe in and leave when I had done what I got into politics to do," the speech reads.

She says she wants to spend more time with her three children and devote her professional energies to the fight against climate change.

"Like many Canadians, living through COVID-19 over a very long year made me step back and reflect on what matters to me most. And it's two things: my kids and climate change."

McKenna informed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of her decision on Sunday. She has offered to continue serving as infrastructure minister until an election is called.

All parties profess not to want to head to the polls during the pandemic, but all are feverishly gearing up for one as Trudeau increasingly seems to be setting the stage for pulling the plug on his minority government this summer.

As Trudeau's environment minister during his first mandate, McKenna stickhandled the introduction of the Liberal government's national Climate Change Action Plan, which included imposing a price on carbon emissions.

The carbon price - or "tax" as it is called by the Conservatives - was bitterly opposed by provincial governments in Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan, who challenged its constitutionality in court. The Supreme Court ruled in March that it is constitutional.

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McKenna became a lightning rod for opposition to the climate plan, enduring misogynistic slurs and threats on social media and in graffiti scrawled on her constituency office. Police were called in to investigate last summer after someone yelled obscenities at one of McKenna's staffers, video of which was posted to social media.

In the text of her remarks for Monday's announcement, McKenna specifically addresses young girls who are thinking about whether politics is for them.

"Do it. And when you do it, don't be afraid to run like a girl. I'll be there cheering you on," she says.

"Get into politics to do something, never to be something. There's a lot to dislike about this business but you can make a bigger difference in the lives of more people than you can anywhere else."

Trudeau moved McKenna to the infrastructure post following the 2019 election. The move, among other things, put her in charge of funding green projects aimed at helping Canada meet its emission reduction targets.

But it seems McKenna has missed being at the heart of the climate change fight.

"This is a critical year for climate action in the most important decade that will decide whether we can save the only planet we have," she says in explaining her decision not to seek re-election.

Carney could not be immediately reached for comment Sunday.

While he was still Bank of Canada governor in 2012, Carney quietly flirted with the idea of a leadership run, courted by Liberals desperately searching for a new saviour after the 2011 election flame-out.

But amid criticism that even the smallest whiff of partisanship was undermining the independence crucial to a central banker, Carney eventually squelched the speculation by saying he'd just as soon become a "circus clown." He left Canada shortly thereafter to lead the Bank of England.

He returned to Canada last summer and earlier this year, released a book promoting his vision for a new kind of capitalism that combines the pursuit of profit with social purpose. He is currently the United Nations special envoy on climate action and finance.

At the Liberal convention in April, Carney finally openly declared his partisan allegiance, but kept Liberals guessing about whether he'd actually run for elected office.

"To me, humility means recognizing the great good fortune that I've had growing up and the responsibility of service that comes with that," he told the convention. "And that's why I'll do whatever I can to support the Liberal party in our efforts to build a better future for Canadians."

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